

Parent Who Hoped the Past Would Be Wiped Out and Son Sent Away to Make Good.

INHERITANCE

By Archibald Marshall

"GOD is very good to me," said the old man, who lay dying. "He has sent me this. In another few hours it would have been too late."

He lay in his heavy canopy bed, in the big room in which he had been born, seventy-two years before.

The letter was from his only son, whom he had thought dead these twenty years. He had been sent out of the country in disgrace, to re-estate himself, if he could, by working honestly for his living in a new country, where such men as he, of good birth and weak principle, can show what they are made of, away from the temptations of wealth and station. It had never been meant that he should stay in Australia longer than a few years. His father had hoped much from the test; he was sure that his son had good in him. If it succeeded he could come back and take up his inheritance, with everything that had gone before wiped out and forgotten, fit to take his place at the end of the long line that had lived honorably and cleanly for many generations.

But the test had failed. For three years there had been constant demands for money, and, yet, more money.

Then sudden silence. Sir Everard had waited for a year, hoping for the best. Then he had made inquiries. His son had disappeared. The inquiries were continued, and it was reported that he was dead.

Sir Everard had married again; he had three young daughters by his second wife, but no son. The heir to his title was a distant kinsman; but his estates were unentailed, and he could leave them as he liked.

And now, at the end of all things for him, there had come a letter from his son. "The test had succeeded after all. He had made a man of himself, though it had taken him twenty years to do it, and his achievement was modified by bitter failure."

The letter was a sad one, but to the father's heart it was more welcome than if it had been a report of triumph. His son had come suddenly to his senses, pricked on, it might be thought, by the good blood that was in him. He had changed his name and gone onto the land, to begin again from the very beginning, doing the things that his remotest ancestors had done, when he had been a new countryman. He had set himself to the task of paying back, and he would not make himself known again until he could come home with a clean sheet, if it took him years to do it.

He had toiled and sweated year after year. Some times success had seemed to be within his grasp, but it had always eluded him. Under his new name he had become known for ill-luck, in a country where ill-luck does sometimes dog the steps even of the most deserving. But at least he had never gone under altogether. He had gone on striving and hoping. For twenty years. Now it was time to give up the struggle. It had only been for an idea. He knew that his welcome home was assured him. He would come empty handed, but purged of his fault. He wanted to see his father, and his old home. He was tired, and no longer young. The hope of life had been too much for him.

LADY PREVOST sat by the bedside. She was thirty years younger than her husband—a well-figured woman, with a placid, rather expressionless face. "My dear," he said to her kindly, reaching for her plump white hand with his own weak, almost transparent one, "this will make a difference to you and the children, I know. But I have never encouraged you to hope for anything. No, if you want to live here, at Sproule—I don't know—poor Geoffrey has never married—he might be glad—"

"Please don't talk about that, Everard," she said in her low, level voice. "Whatever you do will be right." Her eyes had been fixed on the fire in the grate. Now, in the shadow of the lamp, he could not see them, they roamed the room restlessly.

When he had talked a little more about his son and about herself and the other children and she had soothed him with quiet assurances of her sympathy in his satisfaction, and her readiness to take the lower place than would have been hers but for the letter he held in his hand, he said: "We must not delay. Unlock the upper part of that press and bring me the two papers you will find in the left-hand drawer."

She took keys from the place he indicated and went to an old piece of furniture in a corner of the room. It opened to form a table, disclosing tiers of drawers above the arrangements designed for writing purposes. She had never seen this press opened before, nor knew until now that she had kept his will there. But she recognized the two documents to which he directed her as his and brought them to him obediently. Until his illness had made him dependent on her, her husband had always treated her with unquestioned authority and she would never have thought of asking him questions about anything to do with his affairs or his actions.

It was with something of a return to his dictatorial manner that he told her to help him to sit up against his pillows and to keep still while he examined the two documents.

It did not take him long. He withdrew them from their envelopes, glanced over them and put them back again. Then he asked for a pencil and made a note on one of the envelopes.

"Put that one back into the drawer and lock it," he said, "and put that one into the fire."

She took them from him and went first to the fireplace, where she stood with her back to him, while both of them watched the folded mass of parchment curl and flame and blacken, until it was consumed. Then she went to the press, walking with her usual dignified, unhurried step.

"Now, give me a sheet of paper," he said. "I must write to my dear boy with my own hand—just a line. I am too weak for more."

She had been writing letters for him

at a table by the side of the bed. A little pile of them lay ready for the post.

"Can I write for you?" she asked, coming back to him. "You ought not to tire yourself."

But he said impatiently "that he must write himself."

"Then I must go and fetch some more paper," she said. "I have used it all."

He exclaimed, still more impatiently: "See if there isn't some in the press." He said.

She unlocked it again, and brought paper to him, and an envelope. They bore a heavy crest and motto.

"I haven't used this paper for years," he said, restored to his gentler humor. "I didn't know there was any of it left."

For a time nothing was heard in the room but the weak scratching of his pen, while she sat in the shadow and looked into the fire, or at the dark polished surface of the press, upon which the firelight glinted.

He folded up the letter that he had written, secured it in its envelope and gave it to her to stamp. Then she helped him to settle himself again, and he lay quiet, holding her hand again, as before. He spoke no more about his son, and did not tell her what he had written to him.

Presently the nurse came in, fresh from her rest and her walk. Lady Prevost made it of rise, but he held her hand. "Stay with me a little longer," he said. "Nurse will not mind another half hour to herself."

Lady Prevost half rose. "I was going out to post the letters," she said. "It is nearly 6 o'clock. I told the servants that I would go to the post myself."

"I want you to stay with me, my dear," he said. "Nurse will take the letters down."

"I will post them," the nurse said. "It is a lovely night, and I should like to go out again."

Husband and wife were left alone together again. They talked for a little, quietly. Then Sir Everard said: "I am very tired, but very happy. I think I could sleep a little now."

LADY PREVOST and her three daughters were sitting in the morning-room at Sproule Court, busy with needlework. There was to be a sale of work, in aid of a fund for the organs in the little old church, the floors of which could be seen across the garden from the windows of the room. The church was an object of pride and care to Lady Prevost. A beautiful window had lately been put in, in memory of Sir Everard, who had been dead nearly four months. It had been the offering of herself and her three daughters.

Lady Prevost was dressed in unrelieved black, which suited her calm, rather pale face. The three girls, the eldest of whom was nineteen, the youngest fifteen, in white summer frocks, laughed and chatted as they worked. They had missed their father very much at first. But the sense of strangeness had passed, and he even given place to one of increased freedom. Their mother was more with them than before. Lady Prevost had ministered to the desires of a somewhat exacting husband for twenty years. Now her object seemed to be to watch over the happiness of her daughters and to share it with them.

It was beginning to dawn upon these young girls that they were fortunate above the ordinary. They had been old enough to wonder what would happen to them after their father's death. They loved their beautiful ancient home, and it would be a great wrench to leave it.

But their mother had told them that they would still live at Sproule, and nothing would be changed there. It had been their first gleam of sunlight after the gloomy days of their loss.

And Sproule was a place that no one could live in without loving it. Built in many succeeding centuries, it stood in the midst of lovely garden, up to the walls of which swept the undulating spaces of the park.

The morning room was a large, bright room, gay with chintzes and flowers. The good-looking, middle-aged woman, and the pretty young girls, busy with their light tasks, made a picture of home life that was attractive enough.

There had been a slight pause in the conversation. Lady Prevost broke it by saying: "I have something that I must tell you—something rather disagreeable. You have heard," she said in her usual calm level voice, "that your father had a son by his first marriage, who turned out badly, and went abroad, where he was lost sight of. He was said to have died in Australia, many years ago. This

morning I received a letter signed with his name; and whoever wrote it—whether it was he or not—is coming here this afternoon."

The three girls stared at her in dismay. "But mother!" exclaimed the eldest.

She did not give her time to continue. "I knew your brother," she said, "—Geoffrey, his name was—when he was a young man. I shall be able to tell whether this is he or not."

"Do you think it may not be?" asked one of the girls.

"There was a case, many years ago, where a man came from Australia and claimed to be heir to a fine estate, and he was proved to be an impostor. But a much shorter time has elapsed in this case, and I am not likely to make that mistake."

"Will he claim this estate, if it is he?" asked the eldest girl.

"No; he can claim nothing, except the title. Your father could leave Sproule as he liked."

"Shall we see him? Will he stay here?"

"He did something disgraceful when he was a young man—after he had had every chance. For years after he went to Australia he was a constant trouble to your father. Then he disappeared entirely, and we know nothing of what he has done since—if this is he."

The girls still looked troubled.

"He is our brother," said the eldest of them.

"If he is what he should be," said Lady Prevost, "we will make him welcome as your brother. Your dear father would have wished that."

Geoffrey Prevost walked up and down the long library in uncontrollable nervousness. Very little was altered in the room since he had last seen it, and he had been in no such room for this, once so familiar to him, for many years.

His face was thin and worn, his tall body gaunt and angular. Work had left its mark on his face, but there was something in his face, and in his carriage, that still spoke of birth and breeding.

The door opened, and Lady Prevost came into the room in her black gown. Her face was unsmiling, and she walked toward him with a steady step, her eyes fixed upon his face. She did not offer to shake hands with him, but looked straight at him for an appreciable time before she spoke.

"Well, are you satisfied that it is I?" he asked, with a nervous laugh.

She turned away from him and motioned him to a chair, while she took another. "Yes," she said. "But I was not at all sure that it would be you."

She waited for him to speak. He took the seat opposite to her. "You are not giving me a very warm welcome, Edith," he said.

"I would rather that you did not call me that," she said at once. "Whatever there was between us, you broke it, and no one ever knew of it. It has been forgotten many years since."

He laughed again, with some bitterness. "I didn't behave well to you," he said. "I didn't behave well in any way, in those days. Still, you haven't suffered much, have you?"

"No," she said calmly.

"You don't seem to be suffering much now. What exactly has happened—Lady Prevost?"

"What do you mean? You know what has happened. Your father died—"

She gave him the date.

"I know that. My letter reached him the day before his death, and he answered it on the same day."

She looked at him steadily. There was no shrinking in her eyes, not a shade of heightened color on her cheek. She seemed to be searching his eyes for signs of confusion.

"Have you come here to tell me that?" she asked, and the only difference in her voice was in a hint of dawning surprise and indignation.

"Do you deny it?"

"Of course I deny it. You know that it is not true."

He looked long at her in his turn. "That's it, is it?" he said slowly. "You deceived my father. I thought you must have done that, but I wouldn't be sure until I heard it from your own lips."

"Will you kindly tell me exactly what you mean?" she said. "What

is the story that you have made up, and why do you expect to impose upon me with it?"

He watched her all the time. "I have a letter from my father," he said, "written the day before his death, in which he acknowledged mine to him, and told me that—no, I shall not tell you what he told me. If you have done whatever it is that you have done to take my inheritance from me, I shall not put another weapon into your hands. But what mad folly it is, Edith! Do you really think that you can keep me out of what is mine, in this way? You are treading a very dangerous path."

She still stood, her face had never once been raised from its tone of cool confidence; her eyes had never once flickered, although now they were not without hostility toward him.

"You are a plucky woman," he said, "though I think a very foolish one. Supposing, for the sake of a quiet life, for the sake of my younger sisters, and for the sake of sparing you something that you can hardly have gauged the danger of, I were to close with you—on terms?"

"Then I might still do what I had thought of doing; but I should now add a stipulation—that you should live out of England, and undertake never to communicate with me or my daughters."

His tone changed into one of some anger. "You are talking foolishly," he said. "Now listen to what I have to say. My father left a will in my favor, and you know it. You have committed some act by which another will has been substituted, under which you benefit. You know of my father writing to me and the letter I have from him proves it. If I fight you, I fight you for everything; you will be convicted on the plainest possible evidence—almost certainly to a long term of imprisonment; you may be ruined for life, whatever you may do, and your young daughters will have disgrace put upon them that they will never get over. Have you thought of all that?"

"I listen to you," she said, "because it will be an advantage to me to know exactly what wicked deed you are contemplating."

HE gave vent to an exclamation of impatience and wrath. "Whatever it was you did with my father's will," he said, "is done, and can not be undone. But I am prepared to offer you a way of escape. I am dealing generously with you, if you have the sense to see it. I don't want the name of Prevost dragged in the dirt; I don't want my young sisters spoiled. Come now, Edith, before it is too late! Don't persist in this mad course of yours, which can only bring you to ruin."

"I will allow you a thousand pounds a year," she said, "as long as you live out of England, and do not molest me or my daughters in any way."

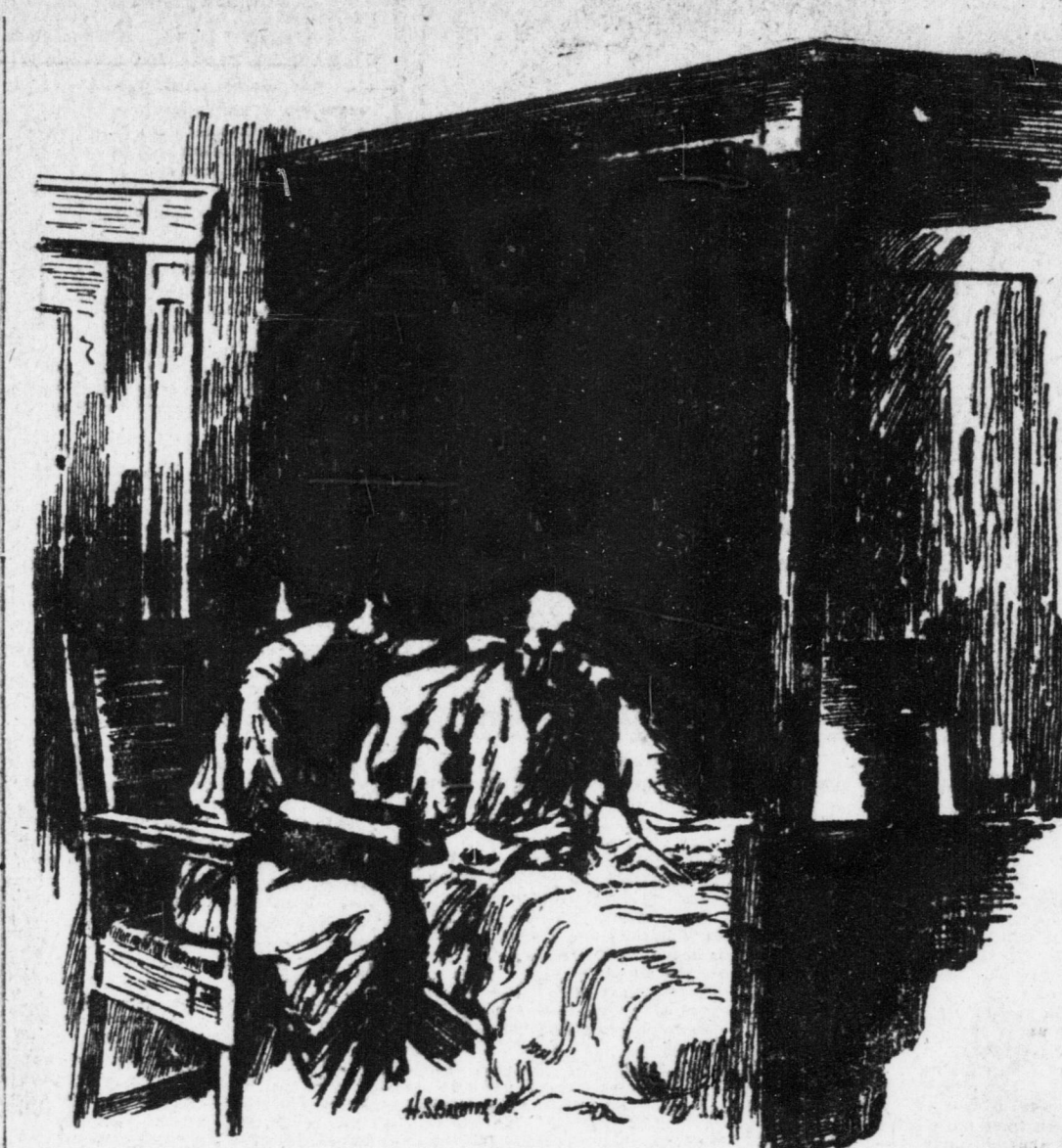
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"I haven't seen them yet. I wanted to see you first and save you from the results of your folly if I could. You make over to me what is necessary to enable me to live decently here at Sproule, and I should like you and my sisters to live here with me. You would be a great deal better off, as long as I live, than you would have been, and after my death you—and they—will have everything. Those are my terms."

"They are very impudent ones, and I refuse them absolutely."

He looked at her as if baffled, but seemed to make one more effort to treat with her reasonably.

"Perhaps you think that it would be impossible for you to live with me after what has happened," he said. "But I would forget all about it. I have not been a saint myself; there is no reason why we should not get on; and the house is big enough for



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all of us. I would be a good brother to my little sisters as long as I live; and my life won't be a long one—a few years at most. I have had my marching orders, Edith. That is why I gave up the struggle out there and wrote to my father. I wanted to see him again before he died, or I died. I was just too late for that. But I still want to spend the last few years of my life at Sproule, which is mine and not yours, nor even my sisters'—yet. You had better consent to my terms. Every one would say you had done a generous thing; you would be freed from all the difficulties you have brought upon yourself, perhaps in a moment of irresponsibility. And, except that I should be in the house, everything would go on exactly as it does now. Come now—how can you hesitate? Give it up. Let me see my sisters, and let me feel that I have come home to a welcome."

She wavered for the first time; her eyes sought the ground. But only for a moment. "Have you told any one of this claim you proposed to make?" she asked coldly.

"I have only told a lawyer, under whose advice I should act if you forced me to action. I wouldn't go to the old people until I had seen you."

"If you write a letter to the man you told your story to, saying that it is absolutely untrue; if you—"

"What are you talking about?" he interrupted her roughly. "Do you consent to my terms or not? I'm about at the end of my patience."

The controlled manner that his youth had fallen from him; he was the man who had fought his way down in the ruck, and spoke and looked like it.

She drew herself up and turned from him. "I refuse to do anything for you at all," she said, "and you will please to leave my house."

"My Dearest Boy:

"I thank God for your letter, and that it has come in time. I am dying and can only send you my love and full forgiveness. Come home as soon as you can and take my place here. I have left you Sproule and the greater part of my property. My wife has helped me to effect this just now. She has been a good wife to me, and your return must make a difference to her, but she is content. I trust her and your sisters to you. Should like them to live here at Sproule with you. I am too weak to write more."

"YOUR LOVING FATHER."

WHEN the letter was read in court, it created a deep sensation, and as the story of Sir Geoffrey Prevost's claim was gradually unfolded, there were those who looked at the woman who was opposing it, as she sat, calm and unmoved, by the side of her lawyer, and wondered how she could have been so mad as to put herself into this position. For it was made clear that she could have avoided it, and have gained hardly less than she was fighting for by doing so.

The case looked black against her. Her own lawyers had to give evidence that Sir Everard Prevost had made two wills, one leaving Sproule and the bulk of his property to his son, the other, of a later date, leaving everything to his widow for life, with reversion to his daughters. Both wills had been in his own handwriting, and he had instructed them that he should destroy the later one, if his son proved to be alive.

The butler at Sproule Court gave evidence of taking up the post-bag to Sir Everard's room on the afternoon of the day before he died. It had been taken from him at the door by Lady Prevost, who had brought it out to him again after it had been unlocked with one or two letters for other members of the household. He had been summoned again, half an hour later, and told that her ladyship would take Sir Everard's letters to the post herself, when the nurse came in. This was unusual, but not unknown.

The nurse gave evidence that Lady

Prevost was with her husband alone from the time the afternoon post came in at three o'clock until she herself returned at a quarter to six. She had written letters for him. Sir Everard had asked her to stay with him a little longer, and the nurse had taken the letters to the post. When she returned it was to find her patient worse. He had died on the following morning without having regained consciousness.

An ugly implication peeped out here and there during the long examination of this witness, and the doctor, and the servants; but it was never pressed. All that it was sought to elicit was that if a letter had come for Sir Everard from Australia by that post, Lady Prevost alone could have seen it; if a letter had been written to Australia, she alone could have known of it.

More important still, the will, under which she had inherited, but which she had abandoned, had been found in the old press in Sir Everard's bedroom, after a search of some days. She had professed entire ignorance of it, but according to her husband's letter, something had been done in the course of the afternoon, when she had been alone with him, in connection with this will, and could only have been done with her help.

What was it that had been done? It was plain from Sir Everard's letter that he had meant to carry out the intention he had announced to his lawyers and destroy the later will. He could only have done this with her help, which his letter had said that she had given. The inference was as plain that she had destroyed the wrong will.

At the end of the first day's trial it looked as if in a very short time Sir Geoffrey Prevost would find himself installed at Sproule and his stepmother in prison, after the criminal trial that was bound to follow the civil action.

ON the second day Sir Geoffrey went into the witness box. There were murmurs of sympathy in the court. The outline of his story had been told. He had gone wrong in his youth, but he had atoned for the wrong by twenty years of hard and honorable work. Now, at the end of it, he was to be swindled out of his inheritance. But, fortunately, his case was strong, and that was unlikely to happen. Interest was not heightened until the time came for his cross-examination.

Why had he been sent out of England, he and twenty years before? For forging his father's name to a cheque.

Details were dragged out and made the most of. But the main fact had always been known; he had atoned for his fault; his father had fully forgiven him.

Had he been in trouble for any dishonest deed since then?

The witness showed hesitation. Counsel waited for his reply. The judge told him that he need not answer the question.

But he preferred to do so. Yes; he had been convicted to a year's imprisonment—not under his own name—on a charge of swindling a hotel-keeper in Australia. It was after that, and he had pulled himself together and started afresh, under another name still, and his record for the last twenty years had been blameless.

Had he told his father of this conviction in the letter he was supposed to have written to him?

No.

Forgery? Imprisonment for fraud? A double change of name! If the defendant to the action was guilty of the crime laid to him, the plaintiff was no shining monument of virtue.

What was there to show for it? Witnesses had spoken as to certain periods, during which it was not decided that he had lived honestly. What had he been doing during those years and those years not accounted for?

He could not always remember. If he did, his word was uncorroborated. It had been impossible to bring over witnesses from Australia to answer for every year out of the twenty since he had come out of prison.

He left the witness-box considerably more damaged in reputation than when he had entered it. But still, right was right. He was only claiming his own. There was his father's letter to him. What was the answer to that?

The answer was that the letter was an impudent forgery, by a known and admitted forger.

The writing was said to be quite unlike Sir Everard's.

Yes, but he had written it almost on the point of death.

The doctor who had attended him in his last illness said that it was most improbable that at the time the letter was supposed to have been written, he could have had the strength to write it.

DAMNING testimony came from a Bond street stationer. He had supplied the crested paper on which this letter was written, up to about twenty years before, after which stationery supplied to Sproule Court had always been stamped with an address. Letters written by Lady Prevost on that afternoon were put in—all of them on paper stamped with an address. How was it possible that this one letter should have been written on paper that no one could be found to say that he had received from Sproule for many years past? Where could it have come from?

More damning still was the evidence of letters written by Geoffrey Prevost during his early residence in Australia, on this same crested paper—those unsatisfactory letters demanding money, which his father had kept. He was proved to have taken a supply of this paper to Australia.

But the postmarks on the envelope? They were said to be very cleverly forged, too. Experts pointed out very small differences between them and the letters posted at the same time as this was said to have been posted.

When Lady Prevost went into the

witness box, there was already a revelation of feeling. She had nearly become the victim of a hideous mistake. The fraud had been carried out with devilish ingenuity and had been aided by accidents almost impossibly favorable to the perpetrator. But for that fact of the disused paper, which was one of the mistakes that the cleverest criminals sometimes make, a great injustice might have been done. It was dreadful to think that this high-born lady, defending the just rights of herself and her innocent daughters, might have been overwhelmed in the most shameful ruin. It was yet another lesson, not to depend on the first appearances of things.

Lady Prevost was calm and collected, and remained so as long as she stood before the court. The plaintiff had not worn the air of assumed rectitude throughout his order, but she had shown nervousness, anger, and at times shame-facedness.

She told the story of her husband's last hours, not without some emotion. Her husband had received no letter from his son, and had written no letter. She had known nothing of his will, except that he had told her that Sproule would be left to her, in trust for their daughters.

She told of her stepson coming to see her, and trying to get her to give up her trust to him, under threats. She had tried not to show herself frightened, and at one time had thought of giving in to him. She had actually offered him a handsome allowance, but had revolted at being asked to make herself an accomplice in his fraud.